

Voyage of the Nereus

by
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1500 AD

The light shone through the silvery sheen of the rippling surface. A thousand pinpricks of light drifted by, the bubbles of air fell to the sky like rain to the sea. Above, the ceiling of the sea shimmered in an ever-changing collage of a thousand shades of blue. Far below, the ocean bed shone with an equally vibrant quilt of thousands of living creatures, all scuttling about on the ocean floor.

This stunning panorama was what greeted the gazes of two sailors as they descended through the water in their craft, swaying from the air-hose that connected them to their ship, now far above their heads. The craft in which they were making their descent was a curious one, bearing a close resemblance to some vast bronze flask, the body spherical with a flat base before tapering away towards the apex into a chimney to which the air-supply was attached. Around the main body of the "Nereus" - as the vessel was named - were several portholes through which the two pioneers were gazing at the marvellous vista before them.

And pioneers they were! Never before had anyone attempted such a voyage. The expedition had taken over a year to plan and construct the Nereus to Maestro DaVinci's specifications. Both men had been recruited on pain of death. They had both been sentenced to execution - one for murder, the other for treason. At the last moment they had been given a choice - "be beheaded or risk your life on a wild goose chase". Both men wondered if they had made the correct decision. With an execution you knew what was going to happen, whereas this ... was a plunge into the unknown based on nothing more than a fairytale. But what a fairytale! To think that it could be them to make history, to think that they could discover the truth behind the old stories, that they could be the ones to discover the Lost City of Atlantis!

A sudden bang snapped them out of their reverie. They both looked

around wildly to identify the source of the disturbance, however it was only one of the plates buckling under the pressure and no leak had occurred. When they recommenced their vigil at the portholes, the view had changed. The technicolour landscape had been torn in two by a jagged chasm that lay across the sea bed. The gorge seemed impossibly huge, its impenetrable darkness veiled its secrets, no matter how hard they looked.

Their awe turned to terror as they realised that they were being lowered into the canyon like bait on a line being lowered into the maw of some gargantuan monster. The men stood, frozen with terror, as the walls of the trench rose on either side of them. They stared frantically out of the portholes, alternating their gazes between the rapidly shrinking amount of blue above them and the inky darkness below them. Surely, they thought, the abyss must end in hell itself? Whether their destination was purgatory or paradise, all that the two pioneers knew for certain was that they were trapped, and the only way out was to see the madcap venture through to the end.

Within minutes of entering the abyss, daylight had faded completely, leaving them in total darkness. The men were petrified by this stage and the only thought that kept them sane was that sooner or later – preferably sooner – the air-hose would run out of length and they would be hoisted back to the surface. They no longer cared that they would then serve their execution sentence – a brief encounter with an axe would be preferable by far to this descent into areas that had never been blessed with the sun's light. Time passed, it could have been seconds, hours or even years, for in this silent godless void, time did not exist. And still the descent continued. The two men were beyond panicking now and just stood at the portholes, numb with horror. And before their frozen gazes, the darkness faded as distant lights appeared.

As the lights approached the capsule their form became clearer. At first glance they seemed to be ghosts – glowing spirits of the deep, but as they drew closer, the truth was revealed. They were creatures, as strange and wonderful as anything that any storyteller had ever conceived of in their wildest fantasies. There were some long serpentine creatures with razor-lined jaws and stars along their length, there were others that were wide and flat

with lanterns dangling like lures from their heads. There grew what seemed to be trees on the sides of the rocky crags, their branches adorned with phosphorous fruit. Other forms, stranger still, also existed. Some were miniscule, little more than blobs of glowing jelly floating past, while others were many times the size of their own craft, vast hulking beasts that swam past with their jaws open, luring in prey with their gleaming gullets. These and many others floated past in a strange, silent world.

However as the shimmering will-o-wisps, faded into the distance, above their heads they heard a curious groaning sound, then the Nereus came to an abrupt halt. The two explorers began to panic as they realised what had just happened. The air-hose had caught on something and was now holding the entire six tonnes of the Nereus and was about to snap. Some recent activity had shattered a section of the rocky spur and the sea had not yet had time to dull the jagged edge of the injury to the age old stone. And so the Nereus' air-hose snagged briefly on the fractured rock, pulled taut and snapped, torn clean through by the sharp edge as quickly and cleanly as if by the executioners axe. As their anxiety mounted they remembered what the Maestro had told them to do should such an event ever come to pass. One man felt frantically for the locking lever and, upon finding it, pulled it with all his strength. This drove a wedge of cork into the mouth of the air-hose, sealing it to keep the water out.

The adventurers knew that they were doomed. The two men collapsed in despair knowing that there was nothing they, or anyone, could do to save them now. Curiously they felt no fear at this point, only resignation. They simply gave up. The Nereus, once their salvation, had become their coffin as it spiralled ever further into the depths. The two men knew that they had an appointment with destiny, that they had postponed it at the executioners block, but that it was here now and there was no avoiding it.

Neither man spoke, for to do so would deplete their already limited reserve of air. As the Nereus dropped further it became harder to breathe. Every breath took more effort for less effect. The men knew that they were on the edge of death as before their very eyes the darkness lifted as light filled the portholes. As if from the end of a long tunnel they dimly heard the clink of metal on stone

accompanied by a shudder that ran through the craft as the vessel came to a halt, as if it too was in its final moments. As the men struggled to maintain consciousness they heard the whisper of human voices through the capsule's thick walls as pale faces peered in at them...

Present Day ...

The port town of Palermo was abuzz with excitement. Just the previous day, a fishing boat had made a curious discovery on their SONAR. And now, returned to the surface for the first time in centuries, a bronze vessel was being examined by a team of experts. As they carefully scraped away a thick layer of barnacles from the battered hull of the craft, its name, engraved centuries prior, was revealed - "Nereus". Anticipation mounting, they opened the capsule. Analysis of the vessel's atmosphere revealed a high amount of carbon dioxide indicating that there had been a living being within that had consumed the oxygen. Paradoxically there were no remains within the sealed environment, neither human nor animal. The mystery deepened as their examination continued. The age of the craft was at odds with the complexity of its mechanisms, and of course there was the question of what its purpose had been. It was later while one archaeologist was examining the interior of the capsule, that something was found scrawled on the wall. It was a single phrase in archaic Italian which read "We have found it!"